

## **What do you think the Committee's strategic priorities should be over the next six months?**

### **Agriculture Bill**

Since the start of the Covid pandemic, many people are appreciating more than ever the mental and physical health benefits of access to the outdoors, and how Wales' landscape enriches us all. Approximately 88% of land use in Wales is agricultural, so most of our opportunities for outdoor recreation rely on access to paths and green spaces on farmed land.

Therefore, preparing for the scrutiny of the forthcoming Agriculture Bill must be a top priority for the Committee over the coming months. This Bill will impact on Wales' powers to implement appropriate payments for sustainable land management, access and nature recovery, so it is vital that we learn from the failings of the Common Agriculture Policy, particularly around compliance, enforcement and continuous improvements of standards.

## **What do you think the Committee's longer-term objectives and priorities should be for the term of the sixth Senedd?**

### **Sustainable Land Management Scheme**

The subordinate legislation which will follow the Agriculture Bill must put in place a payments scheme for land managers which enables and enhances opportunities for people to be active outdoors, and rewards positive management of land for access and nature recovery. Fulfilling existing access obligations must be part of the National Minimum Standards, with public goods payments available for enhancements and new access provision.

The committee may wish to explore the wider economic benefits of good recreational access in rural communities, including increased visitor numbers and the associated economic opportunities of diversification and green jobs.

### **Access reform**

Our route to post-pandemic recovery as a nation must help connect people with their environments, to be active on foot, and to cherish our green spaces. Since 2015, Welsh Government have been exploring options for reform of Access laws in Wales, with a view to improving opportunities for more people to take part in active recreation, and to streamline the administration of related legislation.

The latest stage of this process, the Access Reform Programme, worked through Expert groups of stakeholders to produce a report to the Minister in May 2021 recommending how to take forward many of the ideas for reform, including:

- expanding access to Coast and Cliffs under the Countryside and Rights of Way Act
- expanding shared use of rights of way
- Providing improved public mapping of paths and access opportunities
- Changes to the way access improvements are planned

This work falls under the remit of the Climate Change Minister, but the delivery of any changes will inevitably impact on land managers and local authorities. It will be important that the ETRA committee work closely with the Climate Change Environment and Infrastructure Committee on the scrutiny of emerging plans and how they are to be taken forward over the course of the sixth term.

It will also be important that the ETRA committee consider how all these reforms could enhance the economy through green job creation, delivering green space improvements and maintenance in ways which are responsive to local priorities.

## Fair Funding

Related to the reforms above is the issue of Fair funding for our recreational networks. The recently reinstated Access Improvement Grant from Welsh Government to Local Authorities and National Park Authorities, has provided £2m this year (£1.35m in 2019/20). While welcome, this equates to just 64p per person in Wales, and is not aligned with the benefits investment in quality access can bring. For example, in 2014 the economic value of coastal walking trips in Wales was estimated at £547m<sup>1i</sup>.

Local authority Rights of Way and Countryside teams have seen falling resource for many years, due to austerity and the wide-ranging pressure on local government budgets. This has been compounded by the absence of any dedicated Welsh Government improvement funding between 2017-2020, and further exacerbated by significantly increased footfall pressures brought by the pandemic.

One local authority in Wales have 1,800 unresolved issues on their path network – almost 10% of which have been outstanding for over 15 years.

This perhaps offers an opportunity to collaborate with the Local Government Committee on how Local government's legal obligations to keep recreational paths and land open is affected by historic budget pressures, and how the forthcoming public goods scheme may support or compound any difficulties they face when negotiating with land managers.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.walescoastpath.gov.uk/media/1322/wcp-visitor-survey-2014-2015-final-report-for-publication.pdf>